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FROM ST. LOUIS TO SAN FRANCISCO IN 1850.

BY J. E. CLARK.

[Read September, 1889.]

Walking down Fourth street, St. Louis, December 10th, 1849, I saw several posters which read :

WANTED.

One thousand able-bodied men to work on the Panama Railroad. Fare paid to the Isthmus, and an excellent chance to go to California, and arrive with money in your pockets.

J. C. CARDWELL, Agent.

Signed, COL. ED. BAKER.

Deeming that a golden opportunity in a double sense, I made application as an able-bodied man, was accepted as such, and put my name to the contract "to work one hundred days on the railroad, actual service," the company not allowing for any loss of time for sickness or other disability in that deadly climate. In remuneration we were to receive each twenty dollars in gold coin, a pair of good all-wool blankets, and a steerage fare to San Francisco.

It is to me a mournful remembrance to realize that but very few of those "able-bodied" men lived to work out their hundred days.

As nearly as I can recollect, on the morning of December 17th, we were called to rally our forces by that good old tune which inspires the heart of every true American, "Yankee Doodle," played only as it can be on fife and snare drum. Our company being formed in single file, as each man passed the office door, the secretary took his name and number, and put his check to the roll, and then gave to the recruit his accoutrements, consisting of a leather strap, tin plate, cup, knife, fork and spoon, regimentals that would have been more serviceable had our commissary been amply supplied with even the old miner's famous slap-jacks and good pork and beans. But to the eternal disgrace of the firm of Aspinwall & Co., such was not the case, as will appear further on.

After all preliminaries were over, we formed double file, and under a temporary captain, keeping time with the slow tap of the drum, we marched to the deck of an old cotton barge, and at 4 P. M. took a last view of St. Louis, and slowly steamed our way down the river. Nothing occurred on the trip to mar the excitement of the journey, more than a few fights among the roughs, and two of the worst of the gang being arrested for chicken stealing at the notorious place called "Natchez, under the Hills."

Arriving at New Orleans on the morning of the 23d, we were marched to the Third Municipality, and in a large zinc warehouse were quartered under guard, there to await orders from New York, which arrived the night of the 29th. One of the guards being my traveling companion, I was permitted to go outside of the gates, under the pretence of wanting to procure a few necessities for my sojourn upon the Isthmus, which was only a ruse to desert from as reckless a gang of men as ever walked in line or rolled a blanket. During the night I put on two suits of clothes, rolled up a good-sized bundle over a few keepsakes, then under pretence of going to a laundry, induced the guard to let me pass, and when outside the line, I mentally said, "Adieu." But on the day of the ship's sailing, by the entreaties of Dr. Baker, brother of the colonel, I entered into a new contract with the company, specifying that I was to hold an official position, namely: For a stated salary for one year or more, to act as surgeon's assistant, and superintend the drug department and general hospital, which required a number of assistants to do the work.

On the morning of January 1st, 1850, when snow was one inch deep on the wharves of New Orleans, our men were called to march to the ocean steamer, under an escort of city police, to keep the recruits from deserting. "All aboard," we crossed the bar about 4 o'clock, P. M. After a rough voyage of five days, we cast anchor in the mouth of Chagres River, in five fathoms of green slime and debris. Awaiting the next flood tide and the arrival of the natives with their canoes, we were landed on the mud flats by 10 o'clock at night. Owing to the dampness of the ground we could not spread our blankets, but found them very useful to shield our standing bodies from the dense fog. At early daybreak, about a hundred men under the command of Mr. King, the superintendent, who met us at the embarcadero, we took to the champans, or native boats of the New Granadians, and slowly wended our way up the crooked river, camping on the banks one night, and landing at our destination, Bogiosoldado, in time for a late breakfast, comprising one round of dishes, with bill of fare to please a king, had he been in our condition, for we had not enjoyed half a square meal since leaving New Orleans.

In the language of Jack the Sailor, old hardtack, roasted yams, half-cooked salt horse and coffee were quite enough to keep a man from starving, even if the coffee was flavored with the green water of the Chagres, and minus milk or sugar. After this frugal repast all hands were piped into line by a blast on a dinner horn. Colonel Baker and assistant called the roll and entered name, nativity and residence of the whole company upon the time-book. Then each man had his choice of the squad to which he would belong, either woods-

men, pickmen, shovelmen or barrowmen. Then Colonel Baker selected from each squad a captain to act as time-keeper and foreman of his gang.

After addressing the regiment, imploring all to obey their officers, to be industrious, sober, orderly, and do all in their power to advance the mutual interests of employer and employee, orders were given to spend the rest of the day in recreation. During that afternoon and evening the camp was made joyful by song and story, and music upon violin, flute and banjo to the tunes of "Dan Tucker," "Arkansaw Traveler," "Home, Sweet Home," and "Yankee Doodle," with variations.

The next day, which I think was January 10th, ground was cleared, tents pitched and the cook-house erected. Within ten days the officers quarters and hospital were built. In fact our camp was all in good order for grading the railroad from Gatun Station to Gorgona. Another steamer had arrived with more provisions and an ample supply of drugs; also a quota of hospital supplies, branded "Cognac," etc., articles deemed essential for all officers acting under military orders.

Our commissary also received two tons of flour, but how to bake it to bread for four to five hundred men was a question that puzzled our best philosopher, we having no bricks to construct an oven. This difficulty, however, was overcome by a Western pioneer, who constructed three large ovens out of mud brought from Chagres, laid on a pile of brush, and then burning out the brush, a crust or shell being formed, and then more mud being put on and the whole being burnt to a solid brick oven.

Our men had not worked over two weeks in that scorching sun until many of those apparently the most able bodied were falling sick with the Isthmus fever, those possessing the least vitality seeming to be the fittest to survive the malarial poison. In a few weeks fifty to one hundred were in the hospital, out of a camp numbering less than five hundred men. By the first of April we were burying from five to ten per day. Our supply of lumber giving out, the bodies were laid in pits, three or more side by side, like soldiers after battle. Reading the abridged burial service of the English Church was abolished, as the officer (myself) appointed to that duty was unable to withstand the excessive heat.

Many of the laborers wore no clothing, nothing but blue overalls and striped cotton shirts, for which they paid the railroad company an exorbitant price in extra work. The perpendicular rays of the torrid sun penetrated deep into the flesh, burning worse than fire. The men were so anxious to put in their time, many of them did not succumb to their torture until their scalded backs were full of the pupa deposited by the green fly.

After the poor fellows came to the hospital for relief, we could only add pain to misery by a copious application of spirits of camphor or turpentine to destroy the pupa. In many cases gangrene relieved the sufferer by death. Another great annoyance to our men was the jiggers, another pupa evolved from the eggs of a small fly deposited under the toe nails. This little intruder must be ousted upon the point of a lance, or he will get up an irritation that will cause the limbs to swell, and if the blood is in an abnormal condition, be likely to put the man on crutches, if not in care of a doctor.

The numerous death-bed scenes we witnessed proved to us the truths implied in the sayings: "Early impressions are permanent." "The ruling passion is strong in death." Our company represented various nations, tongues and creeds. During the last moments of life the Jew talked in Hebrew to his Messiah, and died with his Talmud under his pillow. The Mohammedan prayed to Allah, and the Spirit of Mohammed. The Christian begged his God for mercy, and asked for the intercession of Christ and the Blessed Virgin. Young men died, some calling on Christ, some on a loving mother, some asking to see a dear sister, others seeing in imagination their distant loved one. Many died saying in their last moments they had no knowledge or anxiety as to the future, this life being their only care, and mildly asking us to inform their friends of their death. We did so to the best of our ability.

The atmosphere at early sunrise being very sultry, many of the officers found a retreat underneath a large projecting rock on the bank of the river, where we put in the time awaiting breakfast by throwing pebbles at the saw-back alligators.

Dr. Baker, who was a man of jovial heart and a late riser, would often amuse the crowd by walking out to the edge of the rock, and calling out to us, "Boys, boys, quinine, quinine!" which signified the meal was ready, when all "the boys" were to pour out the usual dose of the bitter drug into the palm of their hands, and thus taking it, wash it down with a swallow of brandy. Any deviation from this established rule was an offence against the law, worthy the penalty of a fine to swell the treasury for purchasing dainties from the natives.

Passengers going to and from California often camped with us over night, which added much to the few pleasures we enjoyed. The incidents related of ladies crossing the mountains astride a lazy donkey were often ridiculously amusing. So was the voyage in a champan with a black, naked pilot and bowsman.

The writer having many leisure hours, spent much time viewing the beautiful scenery, rambling among the palm, plantain, banana, date, cocoanut and rubber trees. Many hours were whiled away in study-

ing the habits and wonderful intelligence of the parrots, paroquets, monkeys and the soldier ants. No one was permitted to molest these pets. The birds and monkeys soon learned that we were not their enemies. The sound of the dinner horn brought numbers of them to our camp to gather up the refuse from tables, and often stray knives, forks, or spoons, were seen leaving the camp in possession of those little rogues.

If we desired a fresh cocoanut, we threw small stones at the monkeys, and they, in spiteful imitation, threw down cocoanuts at us. Strange as it may seem, the inventive genius of these creatures was proven by seeing them place a rock by the foot of a tree, and throwing a cocoanut from the branches upon the rock, break the shell, and thus give food to their mates, who, in return, will show more love and gratitude than some bipeds, by keeping back the best half for their wives. We often saw a ring-tail sharpen a stick and drill a hole in the edge of a nut, and give it to her young to drink the milk, and a good cuffing was the consequence of any careless waste.

We found the soldier ant, so called by our company, a very interesting study; one that impressed us with the philosophy of the Scriptural injunction, "Go to the ant, thou sluggard," etc. These little red insects, no larger than the common black house ant of the North, exhibit a knowledge of military tactics equal to a trained battalion of broom-rangers. They have a chief officer and subordinates, their sappers and miners, their carpenters and their masons. Each department is ably superintended by a captain or foreman.

I class these knowing little creatures with the *Myrmica rubra*, of Gould, in color, and with the *Termesma bellicocus*, of Huber, in habit.

A long article could be written describing these wonderful little workers.

The king ant, the general of the colony, is much larger than the others. He marches at the head of the battalion, or stations himself on a prominence to overlook the passing columns. When he throws up his antennæ, the whole army stops as by magic, he calls his subordinates and they obey his orders. The sappers and miners grade the roads which are about six inches wide, removing every obstruction, making it as smooth as a paved walk, avoiding short curves and filling the cavities. When the workers take to the road those going for burdens take the right of the trail, and those loaded return on the other side. Thus like good teamsters, they never come in collision.

If we obstructed their trail with a stone, the officer ordered a halt and made an examination. Then the workers began to undermine the stone and sink it below the grade, then smooth the road, and then join the ranks, and after orders resume the march. The carpenters (or woodsmen) remained in the trees from sunrise to sunset, trimming the

leaf, and dropping the pulpy part, for the packers to take to the store-room. The masons work under a boss mechanic. They mix the clay and sand, and lay up the walls of the house, and thatch the roofs. I have often seen the foreman stop the work when the walls were caving at the tops, then the hands would tear down the work and rebuild it with a more perpendicular angle.

These ants also can compute time; for if the road of one colony crosses that of another, they very seldom come in contact, one train passing before the other arrives. But if they do meet, war is declared, the dead are buried, and the spoils are confiscated.

During the summer months, and part of the rainy season, our men were dying so fast, it was impossible to keep up the squads to a requisite number of hands. White races could not stand the climate. Jamaica and Carthagenia were the only sections wherein to get recruits, and they would not work during the middle of the day. We were burying seventeen per day at each station, Gatun and Navy Bay. The unwholesome food furnished by Aspinwall & Co. had much to do with the loss of life. The poor laborers were forced to subsist upon musty sea-biscuits or heavy bread made of poor flour. The only meat was bad corned beef, or rusty pork, that was condemned as food unfit for sailors use, bought of the ship chandlers in New York. Most of the time the only vegetable diet was the dry, insipid yams raised by the natives. Usually the commissary was out of vinegar. A few men had a little money to buy green oranges, which they ate freely to ward off the scurvy, but in fact only acted as a promotive of a worse disease—the deadly fever.

Out of one thousand men who left the eastern shores under the one-hundred-day contract, nine-tenths left their bones on the Isthmus, as buried mementoes of "Man's inhumanity to man" in order that he may acquire the almighty dollar.

All honor to that noble man with whom I messed for months, Col. Ed. Baker. These acts do not tarnish his name.

Had Aspinwall & Co., fulfilled their contract with him, many noble hearts would now be living to throb in kind remembrance over the grave of the gallant General who died a martyr for his country.

Our contract being fulfilled we were in waiting for a steamer from Panama to San Francisco. About the 15th of April we boarded the old steamship "Northerner," bound for the Golden Gate, with twelve hundred passengers.

We arrived on the memorable morning of May 4, 1851, and found San Francisco enveloped in flame and smoke with all her main streets in ashes. Yet with all that unpleasant reception we were full of joy to know we again stood upon a land over which wave the stars and stripes.